

ALEC VLASTNIK

SONOMA COUNTY'S SPOONBAR
Craft Cocktails, Creative Expressions

By Ruth Tobias | Photos courtesy of Spoonbar



Natives of California's wine country may have vines for veins, but a love of the grape isn't all that runs in their blood: so does a passion for hospitality. Take Alec Vlastnik. Born in Santa Rosa, he got his foot in the industry door as a busser while still in his teens; as he paid his way through college, he found that he was more interested in what he was learning on the floor than in the classroom. And by the ripe old age of 21, he'd begun bartending full-time at The Hotel Yountville, a gig he parlayed into stints at The Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa and Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg, among others, before arriving at Spoonbar to manage the beverage program in 2015.

The acclaimed signature eatery of Healdsburg's h2hotel, Spoonbar takes what can by now be called a traditional approach to contemporary cuisine: market-driven yet globally inspired and big on small plates. From braised-duck sopes with feta and salsa verde to a savory tomato tart with apple and prosciutto, the resulting menu, courtesy of chef Louis Maldonado, lays a multi-tiered foundation on which to build a seasonal cocktail list with its roots in the garden but the sky as its creative limit.

Not that the farm-to-bar philosophy is anything new to Vlastnik, who started his career in what he describes as "a nice, slower-paced environment where it was about crafting each cocktail carefully, using fresh ingredients." A detour through the nightclub circuit exposed him "to the other side of the coin: flavored rums, candy shots, energy drinks as mixers," an experience that only strengthened his commitment to the idea of garden-to-glass craft. "If I can find the ingredients and make each element, whether it's bitters, tinctures, or shrubs, in a responsible and quality manner, why would I get them from somewhere else?" The answer to that rhetorical question, he adds, is a "no-brainer" in Sonoma County, given the bounty of "produce, herbs, and flowers at our fingertips." Much of it is even grown in house, including mint, basil, rosemary, and a couple of different types of sage and violets. "We're working on creating a hanging garden at the restaurant as well," says Vlastnik. "A project I'm really excited about. And of course, there's also no shortage of great distillers using organic, natural methods that we're lucky to work with."

From those raw materials, Vlastnik and his team develop recipes that push the envelope in all kinds of ways. For instance, one section of the list serves to showcase the versatility of a single, seasonally changing spirit—say tequila, which Vlastnik says "works ridiculously well with fall spices" to yield such drinks as the Chai Guevara laced with macadamia syrup. They're also fond of incorporating unexpected ingredients from the kitchen, be it olive oil, balsamic vinegar, or roasted or dehydrated fruit. Yet they're happy to put their fingerprints on the classics too.

After all, Vlastnik himself deems the Vieux Carre his all-time favorite cocktail, "In my opinion, Bénédictine and rye are a match made in heaven." Either way, "creating drinks you can be proud to present and that customers appreciate" is what it's all about for Spoonbar's crackerjack crew.